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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to document the processes and dynamics of two multidisciplinary teams under the Access Vermont program, which provides services for children and youth with serious emotional disabilities and their families. In both cases, local interagency teams in the largely rural catchment areas developed plans for an initiative focused on family preservation and organized around a Stakeholders' Team comprised of various agency representatives and parent representatives. Qualitative methodology (interviews and analysis of meeting transcripts) was used to evaluate team members' experiences and perceptions. Analysis found five prominent themes concerning development of team unity and collaborative processes: (1) issues of trust; (2) professional and personal networking; (3) unifying goals and a common vision; (4) communication; and (5) inclusive community representation. The interview protocol is appended. (DB)

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Introduction

This study was designed to document the processes and dynamics associated with the development and functioning of two multidisciplinary teams created in response to the Access Vermont Initiative.

Interagency and multidisciplinary teams are not new entities. During the past few years, researchers, health care professionals, educators, and business people as well as others, have voluntarily and/or been mandated to form working teams. The logic supporting the formation of teams is that, theoretically, a group of people pooling knowledge, experience, resources, and energies should be more productive, produce a more comprehensive product, and be more cost efficient. In short, a positive and synergistic effect is expected.

Much has been written regarding the hypothesized benefits and efficacy of the collaborative and multidisciplinary team and "system of care" approach to the treatment of children with severe emotional disturbances. However, there is a paucity of research related to the processes and dynamics associated with interagency team development and growth.

O'Looney (1995) distinguishes between the two terms "collaboration" and "service integration" that are often used interchangeably in literature. O'Looney defines collaboration as the processes or dynamic associated with a system and which serve to promote integration; whereas service integration is defined as the system itself. Existing literature has tended to focus on the system rather than on the process. The processes related to collaboration include shared goals and leadership, the development of negotiation skills, consultation, conflict resolution skills, egalitarianism,

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interpersonal relations, and a respect for, value of, and empowerment of all team members. O'Looney (1995) further suggests that a successful collaboration will involve a relinquishing by individual members of a measure of autonomy and the development of a more global and less personalized agenda or perspective; a process that might prove threatening for some team members.

The current researchers suggested that a historical and almost biographical account of the developmental experience of the two Access Vermont teams would identify a pattern of growth, a dynamic unique to each team, as well as elements shared in a team experience. This study, therefore, focused on the process rather than on the system.

Background

In January, 1994, the State Interagency Team invited Local Interagency Teams to participate in an initiative designed to "promote family preservation." Local team coordinators were asked to convene a meeting of families and regional service providers to develop a plan for promoting family preservation including a supporting management structure (a Stakeholders' Team), and submit this resulting proposal in application for financial assistance (Access Vermont funding). From this initial planning meeting, regional or stakeholders' teams would evolve whose responsibility it became to oversee systems and financial planning, program and human resource development, and also to monitor and evaluate outcomes resulting from the implementation of the community plan. Twelve catchment areas throughout Vermont were awarded Access Vermont initiative funding.

Part of the expectation at the state level was that various service organizations involved in serving children with serious emotional disabilities and their families would collaborate in order to provide a more comprehensive and efficient mental health service delivery system. This increased efficiency would be facilitated by providing a multi-access point of entry to services. The initially contacted agency or service provider would offer to contact the appropriate agency or agencies for the family and thus provide a point of access to multiple services.

The plans submitted by both of the two community teams described in this study included the stated objectives of:

- A reduction in numbers of children placed in state custody;
- the promotion of family involvement in the development of plans for services; and
- the development of a referral process involving a multi-access point of entry.

Both of these catchment areas serve quite large geographical areas. Both regions experience relatively high rates of unemployment, child poverty, teen pregnancy, and child abuse compared with other Vermont regions. Working

members on the Stakeholders' Team in both catchment areas included a member from Mental Health Services, Youth Services, Drug and Alcohol and Social Rehabilitation Services (SRS). Additional members on Team II included delegates from the Police, Education, the Department of Health, Domestic Violence and one active parent participant. Team I included only one additional member, a local hospital administrator. Two working team members served as representatives on both Team I and Team II. Interviews were also conducted with two former members of Team I, including a member of the local Police force and a parent representative. Both Stakeholders' Teams have been meeting for less than a year, but many members of these smaller teams were involved as members in the larger Governance or Access Planning Teams.

Method

The researchers investigated the experience and perceptions of Stakeholders' Team members using a qualitative methodology. The principle source of data involved the use of a semi-structured interview format. Team members were interviewed either in person (6 participants) or by telephone (10 participants) and were presented questions related to team involvement and experience as well as their perceptions related to degree of collaboration associated with the team. Secondary sources of data included field notes and investigator's observations resulting from attendance at Stakeholders' Team meetings, team meeting minutes, and planning applications. Participants' interviews were taped, transcribed, and coded by two independent raters, and resulting themes were recorded.

In this pilot study, three researchers conducted the interviews, collected field notes, and reviewed minutes and funding proposals (see Appendix for interview questions).

Results and Discussion

These two Access Vermont management teams were in the early stages of development. This study, then, may serve as a building block for future investigation into ongoing team growth and process. Members from both teams reported that team building is a process; three members from Team II described this process as evolutionary. When asked whether or not the team was fulfilling its purpose or goal, one member responded, "I think that question is premature at this point. The team and its goals are evolving and in a very positive way."

As the transcriptions were analyzed, five prominent themes emerged which spoke to the research question regarding the development of team unity and collaborative processes:

1. Issues of trust.
2. Professional and personal networking.
3. Unifying goals and a common vision.
4. Communication and negotiation skills.

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5. Inclusive community representation.

1. Issues of Trust

Trust is a transactional construct involving a sense of the value of the contributions, experience, and knowledge of another or others who in turn reflect this confident reliance. Trust necessarily springs from a shared sense of security and faith and that one's beliefs and priorities will not be betrayed. Without the element of trust and the positive perception of interdependence among and between team members, the collaborative processes will be impeded. Previous research considering interdisciplinary collaborative efforts have identified issues of trust as being paramount to team development (Blechert, Christiansen, & Kari, 1987; Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993; O'Looney, 1995). Territorial or competitive attitudes were identified by both teams as early obstacles inhibiting feelings of trust.

A voice from Team II articulated this theme:

"I think there's enough trust in the group that people have been able to put things on the table and deal with them as they come up."

A second voice from the same team:

"Most of us that have been on this team had been on other teams together, so we've built up our relationship from there. I think we had already established a level of trust necessary for really the type of team that we have now. So, I think that it was really our own experience on other teams in the community that really helped us in our collaborative process. We're open to listening to each other's perspectives and willing to change our own.

Confidentiality is basic to the development of trusting relationships. A parent identified her feelings of lack of inclusion as a member of one team as directly related to the team's failure to invest trust:

"I was a bank manager &endash; confidentiality is one of my better things. I'm on the school board. I have an autistic child. I work with special education. There's a lot of issues related to confidentiality that I've lived through. If you don't trust the parent, then there's no sense in having them on your committee."

Trust and confidence at the state and client levels were addressed. It appeared that the consolidation of trust at the team level made increasingly apparent the need for the development of trusting relationships at multiple organizational levels.

One voice addressed the need for state administrators to demonstrate faith in the competence of local teams:

"I think giving as much information as is known. So being

"I think giving as much information as is known. So being really forthrightÉ not having hidden agendas. If you know something's coming down the pike, just tell us something's coming down the pike. And we'll deal with it. And also respecting our ability to deal with issues."

Team members also expressed the need to extend this atmosphere of faith to the families they serve:

"I think most people really do feel that people [families] need choices so that people are able to pick who's best able to meet their needs. And I think we need to trust in people's ability to figure out what they need."

2. Professional and Personal Networking

O'Toole and Montjoy (1984) operationalize networking as "the actions of people working together on specific tasks that solidify collaboration and build a sense of interdependence that many who have studied collaboration identify as a key ingredient in multi-action implementation" (page #). Many informants identified networking and task sharing as critical contributors to team unity.

"I think bringing people together to discuss common issues and concerns and offer opportunities to brainstorm and to work out problems [promotes team unity and benefits the target population]. And I think there's other things which obviously evolve from that &endash; support to families, support to the community, to school personnel, and therefore it increases the understanding, the patience, and the support by having the appropriate people involved."

Provision of a forum in which to disclose and share personal and professional frustrations prompted a spirit of networking:

"Just getting things in place and talking to each other and working out the bumps. Everybody has kind of hung in together and there have been times when we all want to pull our hair out but people have continued to just sit down and talk to each other and put it on the table and say, 'This is what's making me crazy and can we do something about this.' And we've seemed to be continually doing that and able to do it and that's very satisfying."

A second individual described networking as pieces of a puzzle coming together to create a more efficient whole.

"I don't think any one of us provides what every family needs. Even if we had unlimited funds, I don't think any one agency, group, church, religion, or whatever group we come from can be all to all people. Who can offer what piece and share information with each other so we don't go off on tangents. If we were in our own little worlds, I think we'd duplicate more."

Collaboration includes a relinquishing of some portion of personal or professional status or position, a resolution of

personal or professional status or position, a resolution of territorial issues, and an adoption of a team identity. Networking, an important component of team building processes, appears to promote creation of a team identity, as well.

"I think it's going out into the community together. It's developing that identification as being Access, and you tend to stop identifying yourself as SRS or Mental Health and you start identifying yourself as Access and that's an important component in collaborating and team building and not only for the team itself, but within the community and among those agencies."

3. Unifying Goals and a Common Vision

Research in team development and multi-agency collaboration has emphasized the importance of shared goals and a common vision (George, 1987; Mattessich & Monsey, 1993). The emergence of a shared mission or an ideal is an integral part of the process of team building. As Senge (1990) points out:

"Visions that are truly shared take time to emerge. They grow as a by-product of interactions of individual visions. Experience suggests that visions that are genuinely shared require ongoing conversation where individuals not only feel free to express their dreams, but learn how to listen to others' dreams. Out of this listening, new insights into what is possible emerge."

These wisdoms were echoed in the transcribed experiences of group members. One group member responded:

"I think that's a place that we're coming to. . . to begin to describe a vision. I think that we're all moving in the same direction, but I can't really say that &endash; 'Yes, absolutely we are and this is our vision.' That's the kind of developmental place that we are. I don't feel like it's something that's lacking. I think that we've been busy doing other work and that we're now at a point where we can step back and say &endash; 'Okay, where are we going ?' and 'What's our vision?' I think that goes back to my desire for some time for planning and thinking and dreaming about what we are going to do and how we are going to be most effective. Personally, I would like to try to involve kids and families and the community together in a way that incorporates kids more in what's going on, so that they feel valued, and they feel wanted and feel they have a stake in the community and a stake in being here."

Although common goals and a unifying vision have clearly been identified as essential in team development, they are also part of a growing process. Team members recognized that a sense of mission is not static, but rather it evolves with maturity. One informant defined the vision as:

". . . a little bit fuzzy right now [but describes] a sense that there's something bigger out there that we need to reach. . .

there's something bigger out there that we need to reach. . . to go beyond and to reach some of the outcomes that we're talking about, because otherwise I think we're just going to keep doing the same thing."

4. Communication

The fourth theme, communication, has been identified in research as essential to team cohesion (Chafetz, West, & Ebbs, 1988; Mattessich & Monsey, 1993). Communication was defined as the channels through which information is disseminated. Effective communication is characterized by inclusive and respectful sharing of pertinent information.

Participants informed us that it is not only intrateam communication and information flow that impacts on team effectiveness, but equally, the channels carrying information between state and local levels. Team members called for communication clearly delineating and defining expectations and boundaries.

"If actions initiated at the state level are just going to be countermanded later on then it's not going to be very worthwhile to put in a lot of effort at the local level. It's a waste of time. So getting direction up front and honest clear guidelines of what is going to happen is very worthwhile. 'What are the objectives? What is the point of having the team? What are the parameters of our authority?' Really define things and being really clear about what we are addressing."

Reiterating this concern related to state and local lines of communication, this participant used the example of a proposed announcement calling for redistricting as indicative of poor communication.

"For Governance Boards not to know about that, I think is unconscionable and it says that [it is assumed] that their maturity is not at a level where they can handle that information. We need to know [state expectations and projections] right from the start. What is it that the state will give to communities?. . . People began to be frustrated about what the state's vision of local control and community planning was. Are there limits to what you can do? Are there expectations from the state regarding goals and objectives? I think there are very definite expectations they want to see met, but they've not communicated that to us."

At the intrateam level, effective communication was also identified as a predictor of group cohesion. Participants revealed:

"I think that there are a couple of primary players. . . I think that those people need to let go a little bit and communicate better with our team in terms of [the information] that the state gives. A lot of times when we go to the meetings there are two or three people who really know what's been sent and really have a handle on what's going on. They're not really good at getting that information disseminated to the

really good at getting that information disseminated to the rest of the group. . . I don't know whether it's because they need to control the information or they just need to make things happen. Sometimes it's easier to say 'Oh I'll do it myself because that's a quicker way to make things happen.' But, it doesn't do the team building piece."

This observation was confirmed by other respondents:

"It seems that by default. . .that [one person] has access to a lot of information. It is that [person's] interpretation of information that we get and I do feel that that is not appropriate. I believe that as team members we should all have access to the same information."

"I think dissemination has been a problem. Since there isn't a coordinator for the team, a member of the team who already has another job is getting the information and then has to fit in time to mail out sometimes rather large volumes of paper. So, it doesn't always get out in as timely a manner as would be helpful."

5. Inclusive Community Representation

Part of the Access Vermont Initiative calls for representation reflective of the local catchment area population. Mattessich and Monsey (1993) recommend that "the collaborative group includes representatives from each segment of the community who will be affected by its activities". This theme was prominent, poignant, and recurrent.

"I think that teams have to like to work with parents. . . Specialists seem to think that they give the service so that they know more about things. Most parents feel inferior. . . some committees only want parents' signatures to show that they're trying to work with parents, but they don't really care what parents think. Professionals [need to] become human. . . to put themselves in the parents shoes and not just look at their books. Parents' voices are valuableE they have to listen to parents and make them feel a part of the team not make them feel they have to be there because that's how they get grants. So, they don't really want the parents' participation, but the state says, 'You really should have parents; you should listen to what parents want and stuff.' How's that for honesty?"

For their part, professionals are beginning to recognize that team environments can be uninviting and threatening to non-professionals. One agency member reflects:

"It's been a real difficult test [inclusion of parents] and we still have a lot more to do to make this process more attractive to families. We have to create an environment where youth and family people feel safe coming to a meeting. I feel uncomfortable in a room full of bureaucrats, and I think we have to be sensitive to what that feels like to families."

Although there appeared to be a general consensus regarding the need and desire for increased representation, it also appeared that the achievement of this goal will require significant and sensitive commitment from involved professionals. Recognition of the complexities associated with more inclusive representation have perhaps worked to delay realization of this goal. Team dynamics might be predicted to change as new members come on board, and it would be necessary for the language of the team to be accessible to all. One professional contended:

"There are not enough parents in the group. I think everyone agrees that there needs to be more people, but it will be interesting to see how the dynamic changes. In the long run, I think we can function without more community representation, but certainly we'd get a broader-based view when we add [people]. You know, you bring in different people from different areas and they have different perspectives."

A parent reflected:

"It was like I was taking up too much of their time. Before you can make a comment about something, you have to know what they're talking about. They did not want the bother of explaining to a parent that had been through just part of the system. . . I think the state level is very high on encouraging parents to participate. . . Instead of giving trainings to the parent all the time, give some to the professionals. What does it mean to have a parent in the group? What do you expect from a parent?"

We summarized the essence of these comments with the recognition that these teams are in the early stages of development and will inevitably evolve over time. In the words of one member:

"Two years from now it may not look like what it does now. That's kind of the exciting part of the whole thing. So, we just keep moving."

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to explore the development of two Vermont Stakeholders' Teams formed to respond to the Access Vermont Initiative. The researchers had hoped to draw from this developmental account an understanding of the dynamics associated with collaborative efforts. It was proposed that identification of variables influencing the team process might serve as a tool for the development of a learning model or source of reference for future teams. Awareness of the multiple variables influencing a collaborative team process and dynamic is critical to opening the process to potential mediation and consequent modification. This enhanced awareness may also allow a team to move beyond temporary obstacles inhibiting effective collaboration to a realization of its full and most productive potential.

productive potential.

Although five predominant themes were identified from the data, the individual themes themselves appear to call for continued investigation. Future research questions might include &endash; "What are the precursors or antecedents leading to the establishment of trust in intrateam configurations?" and "How are intrateam trusting relationships maintained?" Future studies might also investigate the effect of crises such as economic change on team dynamic. The movement toward integration and inclusion of non-professional participants also calls for exploration. Both professional and parent representatives identified parent membership in these two teams as problematic, and future studies should address clear definitions of the specific barriers to parental involvement. Researchers speculate the team members' difficulty in articulating these barriers may reflect the teams' early stage of development. Many participants, both professional and non-professional, identified increased parent participation and non-professional involvement on teams as critical to future team success. Members offered thoughts regarding ways to increase inclusion and resulting cohesion; these included provision of opportunities for parent networking and professional training highlighting the value of non-professional resources. A clear identification of obstacles to inclusive representation might aid the design of such training structures.

This study is limited in that only two Vermont teams were included in the analysis, and in that these teams are truly in the early stages of development; their current status may not reflect future developmental patterns. However, research designed to follow these and other teams longitudinally may prove revealing.

The value of this study lies with its contribution to the literature on team process. Future directions might lead to the development of a quantitative instrument designed to measure process and progress in interdisciplinary team evolution. Ongoing qualitative work will serve to inform future quantitative research with regard to issues relevant to productive team functioning.

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Appendix 1

Stakeholders' Team Interview Questions

1. What do you see as your role as a working team member?

2. What are your personal reasons for involvement with this team?

3. What do you see as the purpose of this team? How is (or is not) the team fulfilling this purpose or goal?

4. What are the personal rewards or benefits of affiliation with the team? How does your target population (children with serious emotional disabilities and their families) benefit from the presence of this team in your community?

5. From your perspective, does your team provide for a fair distribution of responsibilities, roles, resources, and credit for accomplishments? Is its structure hierarchical or egalitarian? Are there defined leaders on the team or is leadership shared?

6. Do you feel that your team was given guidance or direction related to the formation of a working, collaborative team? If not, do you believe guidance would enhance team function? If so, what was the nature of the guidance or intervention? Did this guidance or intervention affect your team's collaborative effort?

7. Have there been obstacles or barriers realized in the process of building the team? From your perspective, what has been the most significant obstacle to team development? How have team members worked to address and surmount these obstacles?

8. Can you identify problems or conflicts that your team has encountered? When problems or conflicts have arisen, how has your team worked to resolve them? Does the team address the problem directly and openly or does it appear that it is the nature of the team to leave the problem or conflict unaddressed?

9. Have you experienced or recognized competitive or territorial attitudes among or between members of your team? If so, in your view, how have these attitudes affected team function? How do you personally deal with territoriality?

10. Do you feel that each team member is respected or valued and her/his voice heard at meetings?

11. Can you identify any issues, events, or situations that have contributed to team cohesion and cooperation among members?

12. In your view, how can collaboration be improved? What actions might be taken to enhance team unity and cooperative spirit among and between team members?

13. How can individuals or collaboratives at the state level facilitate interagency collaboration at the local level?

14. Do team members appear to have a common vision for improved services to severely emotionally disturbed children and adolescents and their families?

15. From your perspective, do you feel the team works effectively? Do you see yourself as part of a team?

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